

ISAIAH 11:1-10

PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19

ROMANS 15:4-13

MATTHEW 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent; Peace

December 4, 2022; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

***Here He Comes!***

**“Here he comes!”** Of course, when we declare his coming we could be talking about any number of the usual Advent suspects, anyone from Isaiah’s unknown Messiah to be named later, sounds like one of those throw-in or throw-away baseball players conveniently unloaded in a trade, all designed to get rid of a body and a salary, or it could describe John the Baptist, the baptizing one, or yes, even the man of destiny from Nazareth, who, according to the legend was born in a stable, birthed in a manger, in Bethlehem of Judea. Of course, for the secular humanists in our midst, perhaps Santa Claus is the first person who comes to mind, as in Santa Claus is coming to town, a different Advent perspective altogether! You better watch out! You better not cry! Strangely or surprisingly so, these warnings are great Advent themes as well! Yes, you get to pick your favorite or perhaps you will choose all the above cast of characters, each one a strong candidate! I was reminded of both The Everly Brothers’ 1960s hit Cathy’s Clown and Ray Steven’s 1970s hit The Streak because they both contain the not-so-ominous line “here he comes!” But frankly these songs really did not help me much with this sermon introduction, though apparently John the Baptist very well may have almost looked like a streaker with his camel’s hair frock held together by a leather belt, this ensemble surely a most sexy outfit! Recalling the old movie Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, can you imagine inviting John T. to a dinner party, his rough and tumble demeanor along with his off-putting olfactory fragrance, enhancing everyone’s Yuletide festivities. He just was not Downton Abbey material! And so, in the immortal words of another singer, Carly Simon, all our favorite characters of this season, real and imagined, are all “coming around again,” stirring our senses, greeting us once more with every emotion imaginable, a scale that runs the full gamut, covering the spectrum of our nostalgic memories and vividly engaged mental imagery. **So, pick one or more because yes indeed “here he comes!”** But before we get on a homiletical roll or a rant or both, let us throw Mary into the mix because so

far this is a very one sided, male-dominated, sexist, gender leaning, litany of participants. There, I feel better now!

**Of the many dilemmas or problems encountered when we read these heavily charged Advent texts, a mixture of metaphorical imagery blended with factual history, each one it seems masquerading as the other, each narrative speaking volumes, loaded with the richest symbols, symbolism on steroids, allegorical masterpieces. These texts give us great insight into the ancient world, opening windows that offer us a glimpse into the wild conjectures driving the imagination of the writers back in their day, opening doors for us in our contemporary reading, creative correspondence that invite us into the amazingly colorful perspective of these imaginative thinkers as they brought their characters to life, seeking desperately to describe the indescribable, explain the unexplainable, imagine the unimaginable, interpret the uninterpretable, yes, and so on and therefore!** Yes, imagination was the engine that drove their passionately poetic desires. Yes, these epic stories are all designed to help the original readers make sense of their world, to understand the breadth and depth of concepts that mere everyday language would never accomplish, never nearly sufficing, literally in any way imaginable. The goal in these carefully crafted compositions was the same then as it is now, prose purposefully intended to convince and persuade, all while trafficking in mysteriously transcendent awe and wonder. To read these narratives as verbatims, pregnant words conceived and written at a minimum of 75 or 80 years after Jesus' birth, his unknown birthday happening at some point in time as a real time event, yes, actual and factual, is to fall short, to miss the mark, to fail to grasp, the magic, the miracle, the mythology, and the mystery all wrapped together, inextricably woven as one beautiful tapestry creating amazingly fluid short stories combined by editors and compilers into a seamless text that we all can behold in our reading in real time, here and now! Yes, this is storytelling at its finest! History has proven that to be so beyond a shadow of all doubt!

**And so once again like clockwork, John the Baptizer makes his debut onto the Advent scene today, coming on stage, making the grandest entrance, a cameo worthy of a cinematographer's dream. He proclaims with the gusto of one of the throwback prophets of old, stirring memories among the elders who heard him preach. Here he comes! John served as the perfect forerunner, the quintessential harbinger whose bold and brash bravado, his unbridled vitriolic rhetoric of gloom and doom and damning judgment, ironically combined with his deferential demeanor, a humility deflecting any hint of jealousy or upstaging desire, reveals on a personal level an amazing feat of sheer disciplined will and determination. Yes,**

**John's spotlight was appropriately and necessarily brief, right up until the moment when he lost his head! C'mon everybody, ya'll got that! This wilderness town crier freely yields, acquiescingly deferred to his carpenter cousin who no doubt was already a capable student and since childhood dutifully had worked right alongside his father in daddy's shop, but at thirty deciding on an apparently abrupt career change, abandoning the family carpentry business and transitioning to radical Jewish rabbi, provocative teacher and mentor, relatable brother and friend. He would quickly rise to stardom among his rapidly expanding circle of disciples. Here he comes! Of Jesus it would eventually, perhaps inevitably, be said that in this man, in this human body, was the embodiment, the very epitome, the very incarnation of God, the early Church reaching consensus, the majority concluding that he was Godlike if ever there was a human being who could be highly regarded as such a thing, the idea of a Godly person teetering on the edge of idolatry. God in person, in the flesh, the presence of God evidently seemed to exude from every pore of his very being, yes, one who would one day be equated with Messiah, the Christos, Christ, called Savior and Lord by many who adored him, first century groupies all, claiming for him every available flattering title once solely reserved for the Caesar in power. My God, what a mouthful!** And speaking of flattering, lofty titles, Jesus would also come to be known as the Prince of Peace! Even so, my hunch is that Jesus was neither an optimist or a pessimist, but was a realist, a rabbi who understood that he was a very polarizing figure as was his welcoming and inclusive, radically hospitable message. Thus, the early church had him declare in the Gospels the reality of the painful split, the permanent schism, from traditional Judaism, family and friends on opposing sides, an eventual and inevitable expectation, faithful followers of Jesus unceremoniously disfellowshipped, kicked out of the synagogues and the temple! No surprise there!

No wonder stories of his birth became the stuff of myth and legend, grand infancy narratives conceived by the most creative writers, composed as what would become epic tales, allegorical language befitting a character who would in retrospect seem other worldly indeed. From floating stars lighting the crystal clear night sky, to mesmerized shepherds appearing at the manger thanks to a full inn complete with a permanently vilified innkeeper, wrongly accused, to sage Eastern Wise Men sensing a new colleague and carrying not only their tangibly symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but gifted with the wisdom befitting any clairvoyant soothsayer, sensing something and someone special, from maiden virgins who give birth, to angels who sing, to a sudden flight to Egypt including another slaughter of innocent baby boys, texts holding a mirror shadowing the figure of Moses, the first of many stories to do so, all of them creatively penned to fully and intentionally reflect

the epic salvation stories of old in the Hebrew Bible, yes, just like the first readers we get the picture. Indeed, the glory of God shone round about through these intensely beautiful and dramatically graphic images, detailed portraits befitting a larger-than-life personality, imagery that when all combined surely makes for a divinely inspired tableau. This medium represents the best of Jewish folklore, proudly on display, still as captivating as ever to every contemporary audience who chooses to read it. Yes, just like it was to those to whom it was freshly written.

**And since I have thrown every other name into the sermonic kettle today, let me go ahead and add to the prophetic potpourri the self-appointed apostle Paul and the prophet Isaiah to our Sunday conversation. Here they come! For within the former Pharisee's letter to the church at Rome Paul offers rich promises and blessings that I think help us frame our minds and put us in the proper mood as we contemplate the coming of Christmas and the many manifestations of Christ's continually coming into our midst and into our world, even as we reflect on all the gracious goodness that comes with this holy season framing Advent's anticipatory and expectant waiting and watching. Paul's epistolary testimony to the Roman congregation, his most befitting witness, takes us back, joyfully reminding us of the promises we read today in Isaiah's prophecy, yes, another place where the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures connect, colliding in a most intentional and specific way, one never trumping, outdoing, threatening, or replacing the other, but clearly for us Christian types, each connected passage informing and impacting the other language enhancing our ability to believe by faith the eternally peaceable message of the Christ. The prophet Isaiah tells of the hopes and dreams of a coming Messiah, a Messianic figure long awaited by an Israelite nation often at odds with a whole host of enemies, adversaries who sought them great harm, mass destruction bordering on extermination, genocide the ultimate goal, and sometimes even dragging them back into captivity as a defiant and dignified, depressed and despondent people forced once again to live the indentured life.**

Isaiah is considered three distinct books in one. The peaceable narrative we read in chapter eleven today is a preexilic text, meaning it was written before the Babylonian captivity of Israel and Jerusalem in 587 BCE. I point out this timetable because this prophecy which one day would become scripture was written somewhere between 701 and 681 BCE after the Assyrians, the worst antagonist, the vilest and hated, most despised enemy of the Israelites, perpetrated what was interpreted as an egregious conquest against the Israelites. The Assyrians were a capable military force, an adversary who had caused immense pain to a people who could not seem to stay out of harm's way, a warring faction that had just done

another number on the people formerly known as Hebrews. These adventures are the stuff of history that makes for the best of myth and legend, events which spawn epic stories, perfect storms, scenarios driving tales desperately needed to be told, conceived and composed by those who wish future generations to know and share. See the story of Jonah and the Ninevites, Assyrians all, for the level of disgust, the depth of disgust on display by those who naively presumed their nation to be insularly protected because they perceived themselves to be specially select, the chosen people of God. See the relationship of the Ukrainian people to Russian occupation for a decent comparison! Once again today we read of the horrific results of wars and rumors of wars, peace nowhere in the mix, nowhere on the horizon, no prospect for the dawn of a new day. Behind each word written by the prophet is the misery some might even argue is masquerading as hopefulness! Once again, the immigrant nation of Israel had suffered defeat, the slings and arrows resulting from what Vladimir Putin now arrogantly calls “special military operations!” In the final analysis, the end result is death and destruction, a human propensity, the worst actions that human beings can inflict one on another, some level of terror and torture, human rights abuses always part and parcel of those whose agenda is demonically driven to divide and conquer, might irrationally making right, historically speaking, to the winners the spoils, to the victors the story. Sometimes right, justified, and sometimes wrong, unjust, and sometimes both parties to blame, war is never the answer to any rational question!

**So here comes the prophet Isaiah bringing a prophecy that was either naïve, a hopeful pipe dream, or simply delusional and deranged thinking! Here he comes! Every time I read these other worldly aspirations I am not only mesmerized by the improbability, no, the impossibility, of humanity ever coming close to this rarified air of a global utopian society, but I wonder how in the world this ancient prophecy was ever even remotely thought to have the slightest possibility to become realized, a lived manifestation in that little corner of the world that would become known as the Near or Middle East. In other words, what was the prophet smoking? Not to literalize any of the biblical narrative but humanity has not been at peace since jealousy and murderous rage drove Cain to slay Abel in an irrational fit of what should have been a natural occurrence, typical of normal sibling rivalry. No doubt Cain’s temporary insanity was a sign of some unspoken and unresolved anger fueling his quarreling, his squabbling with Abel, competitive brothers, one trying to one-up the other, a battle royale between a herder and an agrarian farmer, their kerfuffle symbolic, representative of a nation’s struggle between being a settled and a tabernacling people. **And do not all skirmishes, all battles, begin as turf wars of some kind or the other? Sadly, our warring nature seems to be deeply embedded****

in our cultural, if not biological or physical DNA, a gene that we have perversely created and nurtured, not in any way part and parcel of the humanity, the human creature, of the people God envisioned when we were divinely imagined, creatively made, each individual uniquely crafted as the very image of the Holy. The least common denominators of our paths of least resistance fuel our warring, warrior mentality, fight over flight our usual default pattern, unfortunately, oftentimes sadly seeming to be the easier solution to what indeed are our regional and global complexities, our vastly complicated circumstances and situations. Yes, our processes are skewed in the worst ways imaginable, our history littered with the corpses who died way too early and violently, never having the sacred opportunity to live to their potential, to become all that they were magnificently created to be. There is more to life than war! There has to be!

The problem was that Isaiah was a prophet and prophets either tend to be way too optimistic or way too pessimistic, salvation and judgment always teetering somewhere off the grid, outside the balance, beyond the periphery of common reason! All their predictions and prognostications, every conjecture that crossed their radar, as with the likes of any of us, always came down to a matter of perspective. No, in retrospect they really did not have a pipeline to God, no crystal balls, no uncorked Genie popping out of a bottle, no divine deity dictating or directing their reading of current tea leaves. No, they were very real and very intuitive human beings, tasked with what was perceived to be the anointed prospect, a futile exercise, of trying to make sense of their world as they saw it and experienced it. In many respects we read where it was a thankless task, the messenger often ignored altogether, lampooned as a lunatic on the fringe, or figuratively shot as they lived what was often a very lonely, isolated, existence. That is the lot of the prophet and her or his prophecy! In some ways the more things have changed the more they have stayed the same, prophetic words often lost on deaf ears, avoided or ignored, or becoming the source of anger and frustration, especially when the prophecies seemed to be unfairly slanted toward a specific agenda challenging status quo, or leaning toward ideas or perceptions that are deemed too negative, heavily steeped in negativity, John the Baptizer a classic example! **The problem for Isaiah, as with any prophet, was that Isaiah was not an anthropologist, a psychologist, or a sociologist, not scientifically inclined in any way whatsoever. The discoveries we take for granted were light years away from his limited scope, his finite radar! He simply was not privy to the proverbial slings and arrows, the outrageous fortunes of human tendencies, the predispositions of humanity to solve problems any better than, perhaps just like our cave dwelling forerunners did! Oh, how we have failed to evolve!**

So, as we end a sermon reflecting on the theme of peace, our focus of this Second Sunday of Advent, pondering war and rumors of war in our world, I am reminded of the anti-Vietnam popular soul song from 1969, a year filled to the brim with a whole host of happenings. A song originally intended for the voices of The Temptations, this song written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong for Motown was recorded by Edwin Starr becoming a rallying cry against a warring world. Its refrains are short, simple, and stinging, "War! What's is good for? Absolutely nothing! War means tears to thousands of mothers' eyes when their sons go to fight and lose their lives! War! It ain't nothing but a heartbreaker! War, it's got one friend, that's the undertaker! War! Has shattered many a young man's dreams, made his disabled, bitter and mean. Life is much too short and precious to spend fighting wars these days. War can't give life. It can only take it away. Good God, ya'll!" And the haunting refrain, "Say it again, ya'll! War!" And of course, we would now have to add women to the mix! As I listened to this song again, I could not help but think how we have not gotten the message of these lyrics since it was written and certainly did not heed unlimited peaceful warnings prior throughout human history. Here we stand! No, the truth is not often kind! As Matthew Perry of *Friends* fame astutely noted on Real Time with Bill Maher, "Reality is an acquired taste!" **Our thoughts and prayers, our hopes and dreams of all the years, is that we will, in the words of the old spiritual, "learn of war no more," put down our guns and turn them into something beneficial, useful for the planet, a global village waiting with bated breath, breathe in, breathe out, inhale, exhale, that the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love of Advent will find its way onto the landscape of our human horizons, a beautifully peaceable tableau imaged by the ancient prophet, coming into view as the dawn of a new day even remotely akin to Isaiah's radically wild prophecy. Just imagine a righteously driven world where "The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat! The calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze. Their young will lie down together, and a lion will eat straw like an ox. A nursing child will play over the snake's hole," yes, the adder's den! Toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den!"** And we get it, of course the prophet was not talking about domesticate and wild animals but was using a euphemism describing his people then and all of us now! "They will not harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain! The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, just as the water covers the sea! On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples! The nations will seek him out and his dwelling will be glorious!" Here these words anew, as if for the first time, promises made but not yet kept, nowhere coming to fruition, the full blossom of a bud that has yet to even emerge. Our hopes and dreams, our

thoughts and prayers, continue to be one of a better, a brighter future, yes, recalling the refrain from last week, “How long, O Lord?” The real question is “How long, O people?” Here we come! As with those who have come before and all who will come after us, we can make the difference! We are more than capable! We have capacity, unlimited supplies, all the reserves necessary to enact such radical change, such dramatic transformation! May these sacred words of scripture become more than mere words on a page, but indeed, serve as a pattern, a different and holy paradigm, our roadmap for living befitting all people, whether we believe and have faith or not! May it be so! The good news, “Here he comes!” Yes, here he comes again and again and again! And we all know who “he” is! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and has created us to be at peace and for all people, whether they be of good will or not, to become peacemakers! Amen and amen.